The Colored Conventions Project
University of Delaware "White Paper" or Project Report
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Submitted by
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Introduction

The Colored Conventions Project (CCP) documents nineteenth-century Black collective organizing, highlighting the many leaders and places involved in the Colored Conventions movement and bringing them to digital life for a new generation of researchers, students and general publics. From 1830 through the end of the century, North American Blacks came together in state and national conventions. Delegates included the most well-known writers, church leaders, editors and entrepreneurs in the canon of Black leadership—and many whose names and histories have been long forgotten. Together, they advocated for educational, labor, and legal justice. Though the movement is relatively unknown, the archive of scattered records that survive is enormous. Conventions published and inspired thousands of documents, including proceedings, speeches, petitions and newspaper articles. Since starting in 2012, the CCP has amassed a collection of digitized copies of convention minutes. The collection represents a four-fold increase over materials that were previously available in archives or in rare, expensive and out-of-print editions. Those documents are now freely available on the CCP website, complete with transcriptions that allow for keyword searches. Beyond this digital collection, the CCP strives to enrich our understanding of this enormous movement by engaging faculty at schools across North America to serve as teaching partners. Teaching partners use a curriculum prepared by the CCP team that enables students to participate in conducting original research and creating digital exhibits. Along with the research and teaching activities, the project has a strong record of student placement in diverse careers. Undergraduate students have gone on to law school, PhD and Masters programs and have held paid internships with organizations and institutions such as the Smithsonian Museums, the Delaware Art Museum, the Whitney Museum, and the Equal Justice Initiative. Graduate students who helped found CCP have gone on to positions at UMass Amherst, the University of Pennsylvania and Princeton University.

Project Activities

The proposed major project activities for our NEH Start-Up II grant included: 1) creating 15 new exhibits showcasing original research and visualizations; 2) amassing a database of 4,000+ conventions attendees for reference and datasets; 3) expanding outreach for our crowdsourcing Transcribe Minutes; and 4) introduce Translate Minutes with our first international partner. The ultimate aim was for CCP to model a more inclusive digital history as we recover a movement for racial, economic and educational justice that resonates in our own time.

Project Accomplishments

The CCP and its partners have created fifteen new digital exhibits. The exhibits interpret the history of the Colored Conventions for a diversity of audiences through rich, multimedia web pages. Each exhibit combines original research with visualizations. Much of the work has been advanced by graduate and undergraduate students from across the country. Along with providing an accessible window into this complex and sprawling social movement, the exhibits have begun to help reshape the relevant fields of research. A much-anticipated study of Black citizenship by Derrick Spires directly cites an exhibit created by Anna Lacy (now the CCP's coordinator and one of the co-authors of this paper). Many graduate students have joined in this innovative work and appear regularly on conference panels with established and senior scholars at many of the top academic conferences. Importantly, the work by these students on the digital exhibits follows the principles described in the [CCP Memo of Understanding](#) (MOU). The MOU insists that all partners include women in the histories of this movement. This policy has become a model for many other scholars and projects, and is frequently mentioned as one of the project's major influences.

Meanwhile, the project has prepared a new database. This database will allow anyone to find information on the people, meeting, and documents of the Colored Conventions. A large part of the database is a near-complete list of the names of every person whose name appeared in the minutes and proceedings of the conventions. In addition to this information, the database offers details about many of the conventions' committees, leaders, and the towns, villages, and cities that were represented by delegates to the conventions. Already this data has supported a handful of presentations at conferences, and will soon become a larger tool for research, teaching, and outreach activities.

The period of the NEH grant saw a significant increase in the outreach around the crowdsourcing transcription initiative, Transcribe Minutes. Transcribe Minutes engaged 1,340 volun-peers to transcribe 3,100 pages, 97% of the records we had identified in our NEH grant proposal. Save for a few last exceptions, Transcribe Minutes generated complete transcriptions of all convention proceedings currently held by the CCP. But Transcribe Minutes has had an even larger impact. Its success has inspired a wave of new projects. In 2018, CCP worked with the Smithsonian Transcription Center and the National Museum of African American History and Culture to organize an international "transcribe-a-thon" for the Freedmen's Bureau Papers. With more than 1,600 participants at over one hundred locations, this event helped transcribe an 779 pages in a single afternoon and another 402 pages that participants reviewed and approved.

Changes to the Project Plan

The Transcribe Minutes initiative underwent several modifications that also shifted our early plans to beta test "Translate Minutes." Most notably, the underlying technology we were using became obsolete. Transcribe Minutes ran on a set of plugins built for the Omeka system known as Scripto. The transcriptions in Scripto are stored in a wiki, which is vulnerable to spam and unwanted visitors. Until 2018, this spam was prevented by a reCAPTCHA widget. The Google corporation, which owns the reCAPTCHA service, discontinued the service early in 2018. Given the advanced age of the Scripto plugins (which had been running for four years on the CCP website) it was deemed inadvisable to seek

alternatives when Transcribe Minutes was already so nearly finished. We disabled Transcribe Minutes just short of completing the initial proceedings that were our goal.

CCP's plans for "Translate Records" presented other difficulties as Scripto was not built for translation/multilingual inputs without great additional customization and development. Early on, we asked our program officer if we would be able to launch "Transcribe Records" instead, building on the success of Transcribe Minute by broadening the archive to include calls and petitions. As we look to the next iteration of transcribing the broader records of the movement, we look beyond minutes records that will provide a trove of information (or "data") about Black advocates for racial justice and reform beyond the mostly male delegates whose names appear in the minutes. Our interest was bolstered by the call from scholar Carla Peterson at CCP's 2015 symposium to collect initial announcements and subsequent newspaper coverage in addition to the proceedings themselves. These discussions by a broader swath of participants than those who could physically attend conventions augment information that was carefully curated in the proceedings themselves. (That paper is now an essay our *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century* forthcoming with UNC Press.)

To advance Transcribe Records work, we have:
1. Launched our seeking records curriculum, a substantive online guide on how to engage students and North American teaching partners in searches for calls, coverage and petitions.
2. Made locating new records a required part of our Mellon-funded "Satellite Partner" MOU. Our first partner at University of Iowa has brought together scholars, cultural institution professionals, librarians and graduate students from across the state who have located an additional 8 (!) Iowa conventions (a mix of proceedings and coverage) in their first six months.
3. Set up a "submit records" page on our website for independent and other scholars.
4. Set up a dedicated committee to: a) process documents yielded in this distributed model and b) to oversee our own strategic plan to locate missing minutes and documents, and to add the coverage in our own exhibits to the larger archive in our database.
5. Given papers at historical society and library conferences likely to yield such records.

As a result of this focus, independent and non-CCP affiliated scholars have submitted unknown records: 1) not yet recorded anywhere on Worldcat and 2) that change the timeline and scholarship on conventions in significant ways. We will launch our new "Transcribe Records" initiative for Douglass Day 2021 when we have a critical mass of records and after the 2020 Douglass Day efforts serve as testing of a new technical platform.

CCP's transcription initiatives have been a success because they demonstrate a widespread interest in participating in projects that help transcribe records of African American history and culture. There is a great public hunger for participatory history projects, particularly in covering histories that speak to issues of contemporary relevance. The CCP team members learned all of these methods and possibilities on the job. Those experiences have sparked a number of conversations for continuing efforts to provide transcription and tagging platforms where community members can engage with African American history, including a project-in-development on the papers of the writer, educator, and intellectual Anna Julia Cooper and convention goer and editor Mary Ann Shadd Cary.

Challenges in web development also have marked our grant cycle. Since 2012, the CCP website has been run on the content management system Omeka Classic. As this system began to age, the project began to experience difficulties. These difficulties were exacerbated by customizations to the site's PHP code which had been added (but not documented) by a UD employee who has since moved to another institution. These undocumented customizations left the project in a precarious position in which updating the system would risk breaking the basic functionality of the site. As a result, we elected to begin the process of developing a new platform that would allow for the growing flexibility of the CCP archives. For example, as the project began to acquire more kinds of documents—beyond simply the official minutes and proceedings—that diversity became difficult to describe in Omeka's DublinCore metadata fields. We are now developing a set of linked platforms, built on Wordpress and Omeka S, that will allow thousands of documents in these categories to be added to our online archive. That flexibility will significantly shift the kinds of questions we can ask about participation, leadership, gender, organizing infrastructures, and the rhetoric of early North American activism and organizing for freedom and justice. It will also mean that we'll need to secure additional licensing agreements to present newspaper coverage now most easily found in databases. Gale Cengage and Accessible Archives have already agreed allow us to make such documents available to any ColoredConventions.org user. Amassing a once scattered archive of this size will call for shifts in agreements, platforms, outreach, data curation, training, and more.

We are planning prepare to launch a new website and database in 2019 and test a new transcription platform during Douglass Day 2020. Then we plan to launch our expanded "Transcribe *Records*" (including calls, coverage and petitions) initiative for Douglass Day 2021 when we have a critical mass of new records.

Audiences
1. **Scholars and Researchers:** ColoredConventions.org has become an indispensable resource for researchers of Black and nineteenth-century organizing and legal and educational justice. We see this in increased scholarly citations, public interest (podcast requests, etc.) and in social media settings. It's hard to quantify this as there is often a three year delay in scholarly production. Please see our "CCP in Scholarship."
2. **Teachers and Students:** We now have partnered with more than twenty North American teaching partners that have worked with almost 2000 undergraduate and graduate students on original conventions research. This includes students in Georgia, Florida, Texas, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Connecticut, Ohio, California, Louisiana, Kentucky, Missouri, Illinois, New York, and Ontario and British Columbia, Canada.
3. **Transcribers:** 1,350 volun-peers who transcribed more than 3,100 pages of convention records.This includes our dedicated outreach to AME Church Transcribers, who tend to be older and are African American. We also have partnered with AARP who has sponsored all of our Douglass Day events and been involved in transcribing efforts as well.
4. **Interested Black Diaspora History Learners:** Our Twitter community/followers/interactions include a wide reach of global interactions particularly from the Great Britain and Europe as well as the continent of Africa.

5. **DH Communities and Librarians:** We are connected to this community in both digital/social media spaces and through conferences, HILT and HASTAC (where the PI was asked to join their advisory board). Two of our project principles is that PIs don't present at conferences without graduate or library members, and we no longer join advisory boards as individuals but as a project. The DH community has been responsive to these project principles.

6. **Broader Community Use**: We regularly hear from broader community users. Volunteers from the 26th United States Colored Troops Reenactors transcribed the 1863 Poughkeepsie state convention, which, they shared is "tremendously important to the efforts to muster Colored Troops from the Empire State into the Civil War." On March 30, 2016 we received this note from Brett Crenshaw: "Greetings Colored Conventions Project, Your work has been well-received by myself and the colleagues I work with from the 26th United States Colored Troops Reenactors in New York. I have begun to share resources amassed for a staged demonstration we will perform in October. A growing number of these come from your wonderful digital resource. . . . I've worked at a number of cultural institutions among teams committed to educating the public in engaging ways. I am really inspired to elevate my interactive execution of scholarship by your Project. . . . Through the lens of this Convention and its surviving records, we can ponder a few successful Black New Yorkers with financial mobility, whose quest for delivering freedom was not diluted by their earthly abundance. It is the intersection of numerous highly effective abolitionists fortified by a committed pedigree of faith, driven by an unwavering sense of purpose. As well, The timing of this Mass Meeting was somewhat ironic, ending in the middle of the Draft Riots of New York. I have signed up for the transcribing effort of the site. And I would like to continue to collaborate through my USCT research. I am an independent historian who relies heavily on digital access to archival resources." Another favorite anecdote came when the brother of the founding faculty director forwarded a message with a heavily marked up *New York Times* article about the Colored Conventions Project and movement sent to a group of men from the South Side of Chicago (the faculty director's home town) who exchange news stories: "There is not much in this world that blows yours truly away," wrote Herbert Hardwick. "However I have come across something I had no knowledge of, the Colored Conventions of the 19th Century. My curiosity about such Black convenings," he continued, "has simmered for too long. Now it appears many of my questions will be answered."

Evaluation

We did not have an external assessment or peer review of the entire project. But the project has been informally evaluated by grantors (Mellon, CLIR) and by professional associations that grant awards and recognition (MLA, AHA, NEH Essential Projects, ACA/PCA). Members of the CCP have also successfully submitted proposals for papers, panels, and roundtables at major disciplinary conferences (AHA, ASA, AAIHS, MLA, etc.)

We have also conducted several internal evaluations as part of our database and exhibit development and deployment.

Database Evaluation: In fall 2018, we performed an initial user testing and feedback session. For this session, we designed ten case scenarios of likely visitors to our site, including a political science

professor, an undergraduate student, a genealogist, a high school teacher, and a handful of others we know are common users of our resources. We asked project members to simulate the ways that these audiences might interact with the database, noting what worked well, what could be better, and what didn't make sense.

The session helped identify some of the outstanding problems and establish a set of priorities for the next phase of development.

Exhibit Evaluations: CCP uses Google Analytics to monitor web traffic. Using this tool, we found that the exhibits were under-used in the period from 2014-2017. While we had hoped the exhibits would attract sizable audiences on their own, we realized that we needed to make dedicated efforts to publicize these materials for our various intended audiences. We proceeded by:

1. Posting highlights from the exhibits frequently on social media. The posts encouraged scholars to adopt exhibits into their classes.
2. Asking all project members to make explicit pitches for the exhibits at invited and conference talks, workshops and presentations.
3. Featuring exhibits as part of our teaching partner agreements. All teaching partners now adopt one or more exhibits on their syllabi.
4. Having contributors to the forthcoming CCP volume also teach their exhibits.
5. Updating the exhibits themselves by making the title and descriptions more attractive to multiple audiences, and refining the layout design.
6. Featuring exhibits on the new homepage with dedicated real estate to invite people to explore.
7. Creating a completely new exhibit guide so future work will be attend to these issues.
8. Piloting new videos where curators give a short video tour of exhibit highlights.
9. Creating "Exhibit reports" emerging from a graduate course taught in Spring 2019.

The net result of these combined strategies has been an exponential increase in the number of visitors to the exhibits. The greater rate of traffic to these exhibits has correlated with a wave of use in classrooms, indicating that public outreach can pay dividends for research and teaching.

Continuation of Project

The Colored Conventions Project is an ongoing and growing project. Since the NEH's original grant, the project has developed an even more robust agenda. Based on the strength of NEH-funded activities, the project secured a next round of funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for 2018-2021. In addition to preparing a new website and database to launch in 2019, the Mellon grant is allowing us to develop satellite partners and a regional hub for expanding digital humanities work, and to bring in artists and scholars to engage with the materials and create art and cultural work to expand our engagement beyond conventional educational circles and circuits.

In Fall 2018, the project applied successfully to host a CLIR Postdoctoral Fellow in African American Data Curation from 2019-2021. The Fellow will help accelerate the work on the database to launch, and prepare the next, more sophisticated phase for building collaborations to collect, curate, and share data

about nineteenth-century Black organizing. The CLIR Fellow will work closely with capstone student interns from the UD Business School to apply their backgrounds in information management.

These additions to the team will contribute to solving the challenges of the CCP database. Currently, the database provides limited access to the structured and unstructured data (people, places, events, and documents). However, default search capacities of the Omeka S are inadequate for the kinds of nuanced and filtered searching that we know our site visitors will expect and appreciate. Specifically, we intend to implement a search tool that allows visitors to select different categories (for example, by decade or by type of convention). These added functions will require bringing new collaborators onto the team to help install, tailor, and optimize a search tool called Solr. There is already a version of Solr created to work on sites that use Omeka S.

As we add new functions to the site, we intend to enrich the database with additional categories. While much of the prior "data" has focused on the conventions, new categories will focus on the lives and experiences of the delegates, associated women, and their communities. For instance, we plan to add fields for disability, religious affiliation, professions, and women's labor. Those will make it possible to explore women's important leadership roles in the conventions movement. This work will contribute to a growing conversation about race, gender, and the inability of traditional database technologies to describe these complex identities.

The CCP team has convened a number of discussions to reach these goals. In late 2018, the CCP consulted with colleagues at a number of partner institutions (Princeton, Penn, Iowa). While many digital humanities centers use Omeka Classic extensively, we did not find many centers that have begun to adopt Omeka S in large numbers. This finding suggests that the CCP's development plans can help establish models and raise new questions as the use of linked data gains prominence in digital humanities-adjacent fields of research. Conversations with the Omeka S develops have helped the CCP team see the value of investing time in adopting this new platform. We intend to explore the use of Omeka S for social data gathering and curation in large-scale collaborative digital research projects. This platform will require a great deal of work to meet our specific needs, but we believe that the potential is worth exploring.

Next, the CCP will begin planning collaborations to meet these challenges. The developer teams at these DH centers have expressed interest in collaborating together to build or advance the Omeka S modules/plugins and capabilities to meet the needs that will allow us to publish the CCP database. As CCP partners, the staff at these centers will contribute their staff time to solving these questions, and this process will not require any additional grant-funding. The bulk of those hurdles have involved the challenges of coordinating an automated set of interactions between Omeka S and the University of Delaware institutional repository (UDSpace) where all digital materials are lodged for long-term preservation purposes. These hurdles are at the center of conversations and plans made during late 2018 for collaborations during early to mid-2019 with outside developers.

Progress on the database and these collaborations has been made possible by a new, experienced project manager starting in October 2018. The project manager, Lauren Cooper, has already had a sizable impact on the project's momentum for bringing the database to launch. This momentum has simultaneously

enabled CCP to re-ignite the plans for a richer array of data collection (as described above). The project manager will also supervise the process of developing the Omeka S site, and ensure that the new features on the front-end interface of the website will respond to the specific needs of site visitors. We now have the project management in place to spearhead those collaborations, make them useful to the larger digital archives ecosystem, and document both our successes and the pitfalls we encountered as we tackle creating our relational database.

Long-term Impact

The long-term impact that are direct results of this NEH grant and the subsequent selection of CCP as one of the NEH Essential Projects have been wider and deeper than we imagined.

Grants and Funding, LUCE and NEH Next Gen: CCP has been a key project around which UD has built its African American Public Humanities Initiative (AAPHI) that includes enhanced stipend funding, summer stipends, and professional development funds for students who have enrolled in humanities doctoral programs with an aim to diversify the professoriate. Those funds ($650,000 total) have helped us attract nine graduate students in English and history, and add four additional students after several fallow years in diversifying our graduate student programs. These students in turn helped attract a new cadre of scholars/hires in African American public humanities and material culture. Faculty have won a host of prestigious national and on-campus grants and awards as well. UD's reputation in this area has changed significantly as a result.

North American Teaching Partners. When we began, we had worked with a handful of national teaching partners and none had produced full exhibits. In the past three years, the number of partners has grown to more than twenty and extended into Canada (where conventions were also held).

1. Through those classes, we've now engaged more than two thousand students in original convention research as producers and contributors to our archive. We have also created a new "seeking records" curriculum that has replaced "translate records" (as we proposed it in the original NEH application). Six new partners have chosen to engage their students in looking for missing records, producing more than 250 documents thru our submission protocols. As only 25% of the submissions have been useful, this process is an area for growth. Still, this means that these partners have located sixty new documents that will become publicly available in our archive. To create more productive ratios and results, we have now refined our process and workflow, to include better metadata collection, document selection and documentation using custom controlled vocabularies.

2. **Exhibits**: Five of our exhibits have been created by graduate and undergraduate students as well as independent researchers working with faculty and students led by North American Teaching Partners. The model exhibit for state conventions also emerged from this group. "Equality Before the Law: California Black Convention Activism, 1855–1865" was curated by students under the guidance of professor Sharla Fett, who has also presented with those undergraduate students at several conferences.

3. **Broader Classroom Use**. While Teaching Partners create content, our exhibits and online archive are used in classrooms across the North America. Our newest partner at University of Southern Mississippi, for example, is moving from teaching exhibits to creating one over the next two semesters. Almost all of our North American teaching partners say they've used the site in their classes before coming on as a partner. At conferences and online, we hear that people have assigned conventions proceedings and adopted exhibits in their classrooms. Those informal reports also include high school classes. One high school teacher, John Rosinbum, recently wrote to CCP to share the research conducted by students in his AP US history course. His high school students created compelling datasets, and now CCP is starting the process of collaborating to turn those findings into an exhibit. Rosinbum also wrote an article for the AHA's blog, Perspectives on History, about adopting CCP materials in "Uncovering Activism and Engaging Students: The Colored Conventions Project." Though we haven't had the capacity to partner with her yet, NEH grant recipient Kim Gallon has expressed interest in addressing high school curriculum with CCP. We would like to bring her in as a Low-Res Mellon Fellow.

Press: In addition to coverage in The New York Times which followed on the heels of the NEH award, CCP has enjoyed print and podcast coverage from local and national outlets over the past three years. For a full list, click here.

Grant Products

Digital Exhibits: Again, the Colored Conventions Project (CCP) has completed the fifteen digital exhibits proposed in our application which are all public on our Omeka site. As we prepare to launch a newly-designed Wordpress site set to debut by summer 2019, we have curated additional exhibits, including one designed to guide users through the process of creating Wordpress exhibits. The exhibits team continues to redesign core content and displays as we migrate, proof, edit and format exhibit content, resolve metadata discrepancies, and create ADA-compliant captions. We anticipate five or six newly designed exhibits in 2019.

Database: The CCP team has compiled the names of convention delegates to all currently held convention minutes or proceedings. We have also compiled information on many of the delegates' committee roles or leadership positions and on their states of residence and travel. While this database is functional, we look forward to adding more sophisticated search faceting that allows researchers, traditional and community scholars, as well as genealogists to conduct complex searches. With a new experienced project manager in place (October 2018), funded by a Mellon grant, we can now address our need for a more robust database to capture metadata that we have already identified and fields that will emerge as we grow.

Transcribe Minutes: Again, CCP has effectively completed the transcription of all of the once known minutes/proceedings that we outlined in our proposal. Our most innovative public outreach has occurred through:
- Our Historic Church and Outreach Committee chair, Denise Burgher, partnered with the AME Church and its national historiographer to involve the denomination (and sometimes the very

congregations) whose antecedents hosted many of the original conventions. Working with Transcribe Minutes chair and now national co-director, Jim Casey, CCP created a specific transcribing portal to engage these transcribers.

● Our launching of "Douglass Day" transcribe-a-thons the first of which, in 2017, was dedicated to our own archive.

Since then, the project and its many partners and public contributors have identified a startling number of new proceedings and records.

This NEH Start-Up II grant has made an out-sized difference in our project's growth and ongoing development. Beyond the funding itself, the grant staff has offered support for our collective processes and access to digital humanities communities. Additional media and partnership opportunities have also stemmed from being a NEH grant recipient. We would like to acknowledge an initial meeting convened at NEH headquarters before the CCP proposal stage where the NEH welcomed a very large and diverse group to learn more about NEH's funding processes, priorities and commitments.